

E. N<sup>o</sup> 5

A N  
A C C O U N T  
O F T H E  
L I F E

Of that Celebrated TRAGEDIAN  
Mr. THOMAS BETTERTON.

CONTAINING  
A distinct Relation of his Excellencies in his  
Profession, and Character in private Life.

A N D  
Interspersed with an Account of the *English*  
Theatre during his Time.

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*His Voice*——

*Strong as the deep-voic'd Hurricane that scopes  
The Hadriatic stormy Main; yet sweet  
And pleasurable as the softning Breath  
Of Shepherds Pipe, that, in an Evening calm,  
Sounding from shaded Streams attem'pring meets  
The Bleat of Lambkins and the Linnet's Song.*

BULKELY.

*His Looks*——

*Drew Audience and Attention still as Night,  
Or Summer's Noon-tide Air.*

MILTON.

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# ACCOUNT

OF THE

## DEBTS

MR. THOMAS W. WATSON

A. J. WATSON & CO. 117 N. 3rd St. Phila.  
P. O. Box 117 N. 3rd St. Phila.

Incurred with an account of the 1st of  
the month of June 1881

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PAID TO THE CREDIT OF

MR. WATSON

117 N. 3rd St. Phila.

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THE  
PREFACE.

THE Reader may probably find, in the ensuing Sheets, what may be agreeable and entertaining, as well as instructive; not that I pretend to take any of the Merit of the Performance to myself. I confess it is entirely a Copy from other Books of the like Nature, some of which are not so correct, and others more voluminous than every Person would wish. Therefore I must say, I thought myself well employed in extracting the Life of so eminent a Person, and laying it before the Public in the Manner it now appears; there have been larger Accounts of the Life of Mr. Betterton, but they are filled with Rhapsodies altogether tasteless to the Reader; whereas I have only gi-

*ven a small Account of the The-  
 atrical Government during his Life,  
 that we may see the Difference betwixt  
 that Time and ours. The best Ac-  
 count that I know of is in Biographia  
 Britannica, a Book at this Time pub-  
 lishing in Folio Numbers, and from  
 which I must own I extracted great  
 Part of the following Sheets; this per-  
 haps the Proprietors of the above Work  
 may think a little unfair, but I would  
 remind them, that their whole Book is  
 taken from others, and why may  
 not one Person take the same Liberty  
 as another, and gratify the Public  
 with Six-penny-worth of Entertain-  
 ment, without being obliged to pur-  
 chase three or four Volumes in Fo-  
 lio? If, indeed, our Readers have a  
 Mind to entertain themselves with the  
 Lives of most of the great Men for  
 the last Century, there is not a greater  
 Repository to be found, than Biogra-  
 phia Britannica.*

AN  
ACCOUNT  
OF THE  
LIFE  
OF

Mr. THO. BETTERTON.

**T**HIS Gentleman was Son to Mr. *Betterton*, under Cook to King *Charles* the First; and was born, according to the best Accounts, in *Totbil-street, Westminster*, in the Year 1635, and received the Rudiments of polite Learning in several Schools; and shewing a great Propensity to Reading, it was proposed he should have been brought up to some learned Profession, but was, at his own Request, bound Apprentice to Mr. *John Holden*, a Bookseller, a Person very famous in those Days, and much in the Confidence of Sir *William D'Avenant*; tho' this, and several other Parts of Mr. *Betterton's* Life, has been the Subject of some Dispute. Mr. *Gildon*, who wrote a Life of Mr. *Betterton*, assures us,



6 *An Account of the LIFE*

us, that he was fellow 'Prentice with Mr. *Kynaston*, and that he was bound Apprentice to Mr. *Rhodes*, a Bookseller; but, if Mr. *Betterton* might be allowed to know this Fact better than any body else, he told the late Mr. *Pope* that he was bound to Mr. *Holden*. It is a very difficult Thing to tell how or when he came upon the Stage, almost all Accounts of it differ from each other; but the most probable is, that he began to act in 1656, or 1657, at the *Opera-House* in *Charter-House Yard*, under the Direction of Sir *William D'Avenant*, and continued there till the Restoration, when the Face of Theatrical Affairs changed intirely, and two distinct Companies were formed by the Royal Authority; the first, in Virtue of a Patent granted to *Henry Killigrew*, Esq; his Heirs and Assigns, which was called *the King's Company*; the other in Virtue of a like Patent granted to Sir *William D'Avenant*, his Heirs and Assigns, which was stiled *the Duke's Company*. The former acted at the *Theatre Royal* in *Drury-lane*, and the latter at the Theatre in *Lincoln's-Inn-Fields*. And in order that every Thing might appear to the best Advantage, and want none of the Decorations used abroad, Mr. *Betterton*, by Command of King *Charles II*, went to *Paris* to take a View of the *French Stage*, that he might the better judge  
of

of Mr. Thomas Betterton. 7

of what would contribute to the Improvement of our own. And upon his Return, such Measures were taken to improve the Stage, that for several Years both Companies acted with great Applause, and gained the highest Reputation. The Taste for Dramatic Entertainments was never higher than when these two Companies played; and Mr. Cibber, who is certainly a very good Judge, has given three very strong Reasons for it. First, *That, Plays having been so long prohibited, People came to them with greater Eagerness, like Folks after a long Fast to a great Feast.* The Second was, *That Women were brought upon the Stage, which must have been a very great Advantage; for on all former Stages Female Characters were performed by Boys, or young Men of the most effeminate Aspect.* The Third, *That a Rule was established, by which a Play acted at one House could not be attempted at the other. All the capital Plays therefore of Shakespear, Fletcher, and Ben Johnson, were divided between them, by the Approbation of the Court, and their own alternate Choice; so that, when Hart was famous for Othello, Betterton had no less a Reputation for Hamlet.* By this Order the Town was supplied with greater Variety of Plays than could possibly have been shewn, had both Companies been employed at the same Time upon the same Play; which Liberty,

too, must have occasioned such frequent Representations of them, by their opposite Endeavours to forestall and anticipate one another, that the best Actors in the World must have grown tedious and tasteless to the Spectator. When these Reasons are considered, and withal the Number of great Actors that were then upon the Stage, and the many new Plays that appeared while these two Companies continued, we shall not be surprized at the Reputation the Theatre was then in, or ascribe it to meer Prejudice, that many sensible People have spoken in so high Terms of the Dramatic Performances of those Days. To say the Truth, the Stage was then so much the Care of the State, or at least of the Court, that whenever any Disputes arose, they were generally decided either by the King, or his Brother the Duke of York; which not only kept the Players in Order, and in that Obedience which was requisite to the Patentees, but gave them likewise Figure and Character in the World as Gentlemen, and the immediate Servants of their Prince (a). So that, if this Account justifies the high Sentiments entertained by some of our most judicious Writers, it at the same Time shews us upon what

(a) There were some of the King's Company actually sworn of his Majesty's Chamber, and had Scarlet Cloth and Lace assigned them, as menial Servants.



what Motives these Sentiments of theirs are grounded; and clearly proves, that if the Performers were better in those Times than in ours, it was because they were in a better Condition, or under better Regulations; for as to Pay, it was very far from being so good. Mr. *Hart*, the best Performer in the King's Company, had but three Pounds a Week, and very probably Mr. *Betterton* had not then so much; and besides, Benefits in those Times were Things unheard of. The Theatre in *Lincoln's-Inn-Fields* being very inconvenient, they caused another to be built for them in *Dorset Gardens*, which was called the *Duke's Theatre*, to which they removed, and followed their Profession with all the Success they could desire under, a Reign, which (as Mr. *Gildon* observes) might be justly stiled a *Reign of Pleasure*.

In 1670, Mr. *Betterton* married a Gentlewoman on the same Stage, one Mrs. *Saunderson*, who excelled, as an Actress, every Thing but her own Conduct in human Life. In her he was completely happy, and by their joint Endeavours, even in those Days, they were able, not only to acquire a comfortable Subsistence, but also to save what might maintain them in their advanced Age. After Sir *William D'Avenant's* Death, the Patent came into the Hands of Dr. *Charles D'Avenant* his Son, so well known to the learned

World, for his admirable political Writings. But whether his Genius was less fit for the Government of such a Company than that of his Father, or that the King's Company was really superior to his in Acting, so it was, that they gained the Hearts of the Town, and Dr. D'Avenant was forced to have Recourse to rich Scenes and fine Music, for the Support of a Stage upon which *Bet-terton* played. The Doctor himself wrote the Opera of *Circe*, which came first on the Stage in 1675, and was received with such Applause, as gave Hopes of succeeding in this new Way. (Mr. *Cibber* says, *These two excellent Companies were both prosperous for some few Years, till their Variety of Plays began to be exhausted; then of Course the best* (which the King's seems to have been allowed to be) *could not fail of drawing the greater Audiences.* Sir William D'Avenant therefore, Master of the Duke's Company, to make Head against this Success, was forced to add Spectacle and Music to Action, and to introduce a new Species of Plays, since called *Dramatic Opera's*; of which Kind were the *Tempest*, *Psyche*, *Circe*, and others; all set off with the most expensive Decorations of Scenes, and Habits, with the best Voices and Dancers. This sensual Supply of Sight and Sound coming into the Side of the weaker Party, it was no Wonder they

they should grow too hard for Sense and simple Nature, when it is considered, how many more People there is that can see and bear, than think and judge.)

The same Year a Pastoral of Mr. Crowne's was represented at Court, called *Calisto*, or the *chaste Nymph*; which was written at the Desire of Queen *Catharine*, and the Ladies *Mary* and *Anne*, Daughters to the Duke of *York*, performed Parts in it. On this Occasion, Mr. *Betterton* instructed the noble Actors, and supplied the Part of Prompter; and Mrs. *Betterton* gave Lessons to the young Princesses; in grateful Remembrance of which, Queen *Anne* afterwards settled a Pension of one hundred Pounds a Year upon her. All this time the Theatrical War went on between the two Companies, in which the Duke's began to have the better of the King's in all Respects. A certain Writer assures us, this Advantage was gained by open Force, and the frequent Use of their new Stage Artillery, viz. Music, Machines, and Scenery; but besides these, we may see other Arts practised in the Way of Negotiation; by which, the King's Company were as much distressed, as by the Opera's. Mr. *Cibber* has given us the following Account:

That the wanton Change of the public Taste, after the introducing Opera's at the Duke's Theatre, began to fall as heavy on the King's Com-



pany, as their greater Excellence in Action had before fallen on their Competitors. That Major *Mobun* and Captain *Hart* began to grow old, and the younger Actors, such as *Goodman* and *Clark*, grew impatient to get into their Parts.

And to these Causes he attributes the Declension of the King's Company. But tho' doubtless these might help, yet he seems to be ignorant of the principal Cause, which, as it relates immediately to Mr. *Betterton*, I am obliged to mention. He had by this Time a Concern in the Management of the Duke's Company, and, finding that these Struggles hurt both Theatres, projected the Union of them, as the sole Means of recovering the Credit of the Stage; to which it seems the King's Company, looking on themselves as the strongest, were exceedingly averse; and in order to render them more tractable, it was thought expedient to take off two of their best Actors, Mr. *Kynaston* and Captain *Hart*. This, for the singular Manner of it, is set down as it stands in the Life of Mr. *Betterton* on Page 8, and is as follows:

Memorandum *October 14, 1681.*

IT was then agreed between Dr. *Charles D' Avenant*, *Thomas Betterton*, Gent. and *William Smith*, Gent. of the one Part; and *Charles Hart*,

*Hart*, Gent. and *Edward Kynaston*, Gent. on the other Part; that the said *Charles D'Avenant*, *Thomas Betterton*, and *William Smith*, do pay, or cause to be paid out of the Profits of Acting, unto *Charles Hart*, and *Edward Kynaston*, five Shillings a Piece for every Day there shall be any Tragedies or Comedies, or other Representations, acted at the Duke's Theatre in *Salisbury Court*, or wherever the Company shall act during the respective Lives of the said *Charles Hart* and *Edward Kynaston*, excepting the Days the young Men or young Women play for their own Profit only. But this Agreement to cease if the said *Charles Hart*, or *Edward Kynaston*, shall at any Time play among, or effectually assist, the King's Company of Actors; and, for as long as this is paid, they both covenant and promise not to play at the King's Theatre.

If *Mr. Kynaston* shall hereafter be free to act at the Duke's Theatre, this Agreement with him, as to his Pension, shall also cease.

In Consideration of this Pension, *Mr. Hart* and *Mr. Kynaston* do promise to make over, within a Month after the Sealing of this, unto *Charles D'Avenant*, *Thomas Betterton*, and *William Smith*, all the Right, Title, and Claim, which they, or either of them, may have to any Plays, Books, Cloaths, and Scenes, in the King's Play-house.

*Mr. Hart* and *Mr. Kynaston* do both also promise, within a Month after the Sealing hereof, to make over to the said *Charles D'Avenant*, *Thomas Betterton*, and *William Smith*, all the Title, which they or each of them have, to Six and Threepence a Piece for every Day there shall be any Playing at the King's Theatre.

Mr.

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Mr. *Hart* and Mr. *Kynaston* do both also promise to promote, with all their Power and Interest, an Agreement between both Play-houses; and Mr. *Kynaston* for himself promises to endeavour, as much as he can, to get free, that he may act at the Duke's Theatre; but he is not obliged to play, unless he has ten Shillings per Day for his Acting, and his Pension then to cease.

Mr. *Hart* and Mr. *Kynaston* do promise to go to Law with Mr. *Killigrew*, to have these Articles performed, and are to be at the Expence of the Suit.

*In Witness of this Agreement all the Parties have hereunto set their Hands, this fourteenth Day of October, 1681.*

It was by these Measures, that, at length, the King's Company were compelled to come into the Scheme, which those at the Head of the Duke's Company had formed, of submitting to a Coalition, from whence it was hoped, a new Company might spring, superior, in every Respect, to all that had gone before them. We cannot positively tell, what Time this singular Revolution happened; but, according to the best Accounts, it was about the Year 1686. Mr. *Gildon* says positively, that Mr. *Hart* and Mr. *Kynaston* performed their Promises so well, that the Union was effected in 1682. But Mr. *Cibber* says, it was brought about in 1684, by



by the King's Advice, which amounted to a Command; in Mr. Dryden's Poems, we have a Prologue and Epilogue upon the Union of the two Companies, which is dated 1686. from which, as the most probable, I have ventured my Conjecture.

By this Union a new Company was formed, composed of the best Actors that ever appeared on the *English* Stage together, as appears from the following List given us by Mr. Cibber, in 1690, when he came into the Company, viz. MEN. Mr. Betterton, Mr. Mountfort, Mr. Kynaston, Mr. Sandford, Mr. Nokes, Mr. Underhill, and Mr. Leigh.

WOMEN. Mrs. Betterton, Mrs. Barry, Mrs. Leigh, Mrs. Butler, Mrs. Mountfort, and Mrs. Bracegirdle.

It was in this united Company, that Mr. Betterton shone with unrivalled Lustre, and that having survived the famous Actors upon whose Model he had formed himself, he was now at Liberty to discover his mighty Genius in its full Extent, by replacing many of them with Advantage in those Characters, in which, during their Life-times, they had been thought inimitable.

Of this it would be hard to yield Belief, and harder still to gain a just Notion of what we ought to believe about it, if we had not, from a living, capable, and candid Writer, as authentic a Testimony, and at the

the same Time, as clear, and as distinct Account of his Excellence in this Respect, as our own, or indeed any Language will bear, and which may be justly esteemed a Description equally expressive and worthy of its Subject (a). Happy in the Notice of his Sovereign, the Protection of the Nobility, and the general Respect of all Ranks of People, who considered him as an Honour to the Stage and to his Country, he might have passed through Life with as much Ease, Satisfaction, and Peace of Mind, as any Man of his Time, as having actually saved out of his small Allowance, if not an ample, at least a competent Estate; had he not been persuaded to attempt becoming rich, which unluckily engaged him in a Design, which swept away all his Capital and left him in real Distress. This fell out in 1692, and though nothing could fall harder upon such a Man, and at such a Time of Life, yet he bore it with manly Patience, not only without Murmur or Complaint, but even without Mention; and was so far from suffering this severe Stroke of ill Fortune, fallen upon him, by following the Advice of one he thought his Friend, to prejudice that Friend, who ventured and lost more than himself, that, on the contrary, he continued his Friendship to his Daughter, after his Decease,

(a) See Page 28.

cease, and did for her all he could have done for his own.

As our Readers will doubtless be desirous of knowing the Particulars of this extraordinary Circumstance of Mr. *Betterton's* Life; I shall set it down as follows, being the most authentic Account possible to be procured at this Distance of Time.

As Mr. *Betterton's* Character in private Life was extremely fair, and his Company very agreeable, he had Abundance of Friends at all Ends of the Town, but more especially in the City.

Amongst these there was a Gentleman, whom I forbear to name, of great Reputation, and of considerable Fortune, who not only honoured him with his Favour and Protection, but entered with him also into the strictest Intimacy and Friendship. This Gentleman, in the Year 1692, was concerned in an Adventure to the *East Indies*, upon the Footing then allowed by the Company's Charter, which Vessels so employed were stiled Interlopers. The Prospect of Success was great, the Gain unusually high; and this induced Mr. *Betterton*, to whom his Friend offered any Share in this Business that he pleased, to think of so large a Sum as eight thousand Pounds; but it was not for himself, for he had no such Sum in his Power; and whoever considers the Situation of the Stage at that Time, will need no other Argument to convince him of it. Yet he had another Friend, whom he was willing to oblige, which was the famous



Dr. Radcliffe; so Mr. Betterton advanced somewhat more than two thousand Pounds, which was his all, and the Doctor made it up eight thousand.

The Vessel sailed to the *East Indies*, and made as prosperous a Voyage as those that were concerned in her could wish; and the War with *France* being then very warm, the Captain very prudently came Home North about, and arrived safely in *Ireland*. But whether obliged by the Orders of his Owners, or elated by his Success hitherto, so it was, that in his Passage from *Ireland* he was taken by the *French*.

His Cargo was worth upwards of one hundred and twenty thousand Pounds, which ruined Mr. Betterton, and broke the Fortune and the Heart of his Friend in the City. As for Dr. Radcliffe, he expressed a great Concern for Mr. Betterton, and none for himself. It is, said the Doctor wittily, only trotting up some hundred Pair of Stairs more, and Things are as they were. The Gentleman in the City left behind him an only Daughter, whom Mr. Betterton took Home, and educated with all the Care and Tenderneſs of a Parent, till she thought fit to marry herself to Mr. Bowman the Player, who is but very lately dead, and whose Behaviour was such, as not only recommended him to the personal Esteem of all that knew him, but gave Credit to the Reports of the Excellency of the old Stage, when Players in general were like him.

But to return to Mr. Betterton, such was the Virtue! Such the Integrity! Such the Magnanimity! of that Gentleman; who in  
his

his private Character was as great as any he borrowed from the Poets, and was therefore always considered as the Head of the Theatre, tho' vested there with very little Power.

The Patentees, as there was now only one Theatre, considered it as a Means of accumulating Wealth to themselves by the Labours of others; and having this Maxim once in their Minds, it began to have so strong an Influence on their Conduct, that the Actors soon found themselves in a very dismal Condition. They were oppressed without Decency, left without Means of Redress for the present, and without Hopes for the future.

In this dismal Situation, Mr. *Betterton* endeavoured to convince the Managers of their Folly, and laboured to shew from Reason and Experience, that the Means they used were very ill suited to the Ends they proposed, and that every Government must fail, where the *Few* forgot their Obligations to the *Many*. This Language, in the Ears of this Theatrical Ministry, sounded like Treason, and therefore, instead of thinking how to remedy the Mischiefs complained of, they bent their Thoughts to get the better of their Monitor, as if the not hearing of Faults was equivalent to mending them. It was with this View, that they began to give some of *Betterton's* best Parts to young Actors, supposing this would lessen his Cha-

racter and abate his Influence. But this Policy not only ruined them, but assisted him; the Public resented having Plays ill acted, when they knew they might be acted better. The wisest and best Players attached themselves wholly to *Betterton*, and desired him to turn his Thoughts on some Method, of procuring himself and them Justice. Thus, Stage Tyranny brought about the Destruction of that Power by which it was exercised, and the very Steps taken to render *Betterton* desperate, pointed out the Way to his Deliverance.

The general Acquaintance he had amongst Persons of the first Distinction, gave him an Opportunity of representing his Case to them; and his Case was so very reasonable in itself, that being truly represented, it was enough to affect all great and generous Minds, with a Desire of procuring so worthy and so extraordinary a Person's Relief. But tho' the Quality of those that sought this was great, and the Thing sought very reasonable; yet, for all that, it was far from being easily brought about. But at length, partly thro' the Hardship Mr. *Betterton* and his People endured, and partly thro' the Obstinacy of the Patentees, who would listen to nothing, it was held equally legal and just, that the Royal Authority should interpose for the Cure of an Evil, which sprung entirely from an Abuse of Royal Favour. King *William* granted



granted this Favour at the Instance of the famous Earl of *Dorset*, the Friend, the Favourite, and Protector of the Muses; the Nobility also, led by his Example, contributed, by a voluntary Subscription, to raise a Theatre for them to play in, and this produced the new Play-house, near that which is still standing in *Lincoln's-Inn Fields*.

This Theatre was opened in *April* 1695, with very great Advantages. Mr. *Congreve* accepted a Share with this Company, as Mr. *Dryden* had formerly with the King's Company; and the first Play they acted, was his admirable Comedy of *Love for Love*. The King honoured it with his Presence, there was a large and splendid Audience, Mr. *Betterton* spoke a Prologue, and Mrs. *Bracegirdle* an Epilogue, suitable to the Occasion; and it appeared plainly, by the Reception they met with, the Town knew how to discern and reward that Merit, the ill-judging Patentees of the Duke's Theatre had treated so ill.

But with all these Advantages, *Betterton's* Company were not able to maintain this Flow of Prosperity beyond two or three Seasons. Mr. *Congreve* was an excellent, and therefore a slow Writer; the other House had the Advantage of two Authors, who produced without Pain, *Vanbrugh* and *Cibber*; they wrote, if not finished, at least taking Plays, and tho' they were sometimes mauled by the Critics, they were sure of being applauded  
by

by the People. This gave such a Turn in their Favour, that, with all their Merit, *Betterton's* Actors had been undone, but for the seasonable Relief of *the Mourning Bride*, and *the Way of the World*, which came like Reprieves, and saved them at the last Gasps.

In a few Years, however, it appearing plainly, that without a new Support from their Friends, it was impossible for them to maintain their Independance, the Protectors of Mr. *Betterton* set on Foot a new Subscription, for building a Theatre in the *Hay-market*, under the Direction of Sir *John Vanbrugh*, which was finished in 1706. This Favour was kindly received by Mr. *Betterton*, but he was now grown old, his Health and Strength much impaired by constant Application, and his Fortune in a Condition still worse than those of his personal Circumstances. He chose therefore, all Things considered, and more especially an untractable Spirit grown up among his Actors, occasioned by Losses and Disappointments, to decline his Post, and put the whole Design under the Conduct of Mr. *Congreve* and Sir *John Vanbrugh*. The Former of these abandoned it soon after to Sir *John* entirely; and *Betterton's* Strength failing, many of the old Players dying, and other Accidents happening, a Reunion of the Companies became not only expedient but necessary,

necessary, and accordingly it took Place soon after.

We are now released from the Task of pursuing the Stage History any farther; hitherto it was that of *Betterton*, with whom it grew, it flourished, it reached Perfection, it declined, it decayed; and as the Story of a great Prince carries in that of his People, so to write the Life of *Mr. Betterton* fairly, is to give the History of the Theatre during his Time (b). At last, indeed, they separated, but by Degrees, and not with any Unkindness.

After *Mr. Betterton* reached seventy, his Infirmities grew on him greatly, his Fits of the Gout were more lasting and more severe. His Circumstances also, which had not been mended by his having the Conduct of the Theatre, grew daily freighter, and all this, joined to his Wife's ill State of Health, made his Condition more melancholy, at a Time of Life, when the highest Affluence could not have made them chearful. Yet even under all these Pressures he kept up his Spirits, and was as serene as ever, though somewhat less active; nay, he acted still when his Health would permit, which, however, was but seldom.

The Public (in those Days grateful) remembered the Pleasure that *Betterton* had given

(b) *Betterton's Life* 8vo.



ven them, and could not suffer, after fifty Years Service, so deserving a Person should withdraw, without some considerable Marks of their Bounty. It was in the Spring 1709, that a Benefit, which was not then, as now, a common Favour, much less a Thing of Right, was granted to Mr. *Betterton*, and the Play of *Love for Love* was acted at the Theatre Royal, on the seventh of *April*, for that Purpose. Two of the best Actresses that ever graced our Stage, and who had then quitted it, came upon that Occasion to render it more advantageous; the Part of *Valentine* was played by Mr. *Betterton*, *Angelica*, by Mrs. *Bracegirdle*, and Mrs. *Barry* performed that of *Frail*. The Epilogue, spoke by her, was written by Mr. *Rowe*; and so well was this Affair conducted, that we are told it produced Mr. *Betterton* five hundred Pounds, and a Promise the Favour should be annually continued.

These extraordinary Marks of public Gratitude had a proper Effect upon Mr. *Betterton*, who, instead of indulging himself on their Bounty, exerted the Spirits given by this seasonable Act of their Generosity, in their Service, and appeared and acted as often as his Health would permit. On the twentieth of *September* following, in particular, he performed the Character of *Hamlet*, with such Vivacity as well as Justice, that it gave universal Satisfaction to the best Judges.

This

This Activity of his in the Winter, kept off the Gout longer than usual, but the Fit was more violent for it when it came upon him in the Spring. This was the more unlucky, by its being about the Time of his Benefit, when the Success of his Play was sure to depend, in a great Measure, upon his own Performance. The Day fixed was *April* the Thirteenth, and the Play made Choice of was the *Maids Tragedy*, in which he acted the Part of *Melantius*, and Notice was given accordingly; but the Fit intervened, and that he might not disappoint the Town, Mr. *Betterton* was forced to allow of outward Applications to reduce the Swelling of his Feet, which had such an Effect, that he was able to appear on the Stage, tho' he was forced to use a Slipper.

He acted that Day with universal Applause; but this could not defend him from paying a very dear Price for those momentary Marks of Approbation, since the gouty Humour, repelled by Fomentations, soon seized upon the noble Parts, which being, perhaps, weakened by his extraordinary Fatigue on that Occasion, he was not able to make a long Resistance, but on the twenty-eighth Day of *April* 1710, paid that Tribute to Nature, from which neither Heroes, nor those who play them, can be exempted. His Behaviour raised his Reputation and Character, in his Life-time, as high

as he could wish; he received the strongest Proofs of publick Esteem, we may say, almost literally, in his last Moment; and such Honours were paid his Memory after Death, as only his Memory could deserve. For on the second of *May* following, his Corps was, with much Ceremony, interred in *Westminster Abbey*. His good Friend the *Tatler* makes the following Remarks on Mr. *Betterton* in No. 167.

I have hardly a Notion (says he) that any Performer of Antiquity could surpass the Action of Mr. *Betterton*, in any of the Occasions in which he has appeared on our Stage. The wonderful Agony which he appeared in when he examined the Circumstance of the Handkerchief in *Othello*; the Mixture of Love that intruded upon his Mind upon the innocent Answers *Desdemona* makes; betrayed in his Gesture such a Variety and Vicissitude of Passions, as would admonish a Man to be afraid of his own Heart, and perfectly convince him, that it is to stab it, to admit, that worst of Daggers, Jealousy. Whoever reads in his Closet this admirable Scene, will find that he cannot, except he has as warm an Imagination as *Shakespeare* himself, find any but dry, incoherent, and broken Sentences: But a Reader that has seen *Betterton* act it, observes there could not be a Word added; that longer Speeches had been unnatural, nay, impossible, in *Othello's* Circumstances.

The charming Passage in the same Tragedy, where he tells the Manner of winning the Affection of his Mistress, was urged with so moving



ing and graceful an Energy, that while I walked in the Cloysters, I thought of him with the same Concern as if I waited for the Remains of a Person who had in real Life done all that I had seen him represent. The Gloom of the Place, and faint Lights before the Ceremony appeared, contributed to the melancholy Disposition I was in; and I began to be extremely afflicted that *Hotspur's* Gallantry was so unfortunate, and that the Mirth and good Humour of *Falstaff* could not exempt him from the Grave. Nay, this Occasion, in me, who look upon the Distinctions amongst Men to be merely scenical, raised Reflections upon the Emptiness of all Human Perfections and Greatness in general; and I could not but regret, that the sacred Heads of those who lie buried, in the Neighbourhood of this little Portion of Earth in which my poor old Friend is deposited, are returned to Dust as well as he, and that there is no Difference in the Grave between the imaginary and the real Monarch. This made me say of Human Life itself with *Macbeth*:

To-morrow, To-morrow, and To-morrow,  
Creeps in a stealing Pace from Day to Day  
To the last Moment of recorded Time!  
And all our Yesterdays have lighted Fools  
To their eternal Night! Out, out, short  
Candle!  
Life's but a walking Shadow, a poor Player  
That struts and frets his Hour upon the Stage,  
And then is heard no more.

But as to the Character of this great Man, in the Way of his Profession, we

shall set it down as drawn by Mr. *Cibber*, whose long Acquaintance with him in that Character, must have given him great Opportunities of knowing him thoroughly, and whose Excellence, in that Profession must render him a very competent Judge.

*Betterton* (says he) was an Actor, as *Shakespeare* was an Author, both without Competitors! Formed for the mutual Assistance and Illustration of each others Genius! How *Shakespeare* wrote, all Men who have a Taste for Nature may read and know; but with what higher Rapture would he still be read, could they conceive how *Betterton* played him! Then might they know the one was born alone to speak, what the other only knew how to write! Pity it is, that the momentary Beauties flowing from an harmonious Elocution, cannot like those of Poetry, be their own Record! That the animated Graces of the Player can live no longer than the instant Breath and Motion that presents them, or at best, can but faintly glimmer thro' the Memory, or imperfect Attestation of a few surviving Spectators.

Could how *Betterton* spoke be as easily known as what he spoke, then might you see the Muse of *Shakespeare* in her Triumph, with all her Beauties in their best Array, rising into real Life, and charming her Beholders. But, alas! since all this is so far out of the Reach of Description, how shall I shew you *Betterton*? Should I therefore tell you, that all the *Othello's*, *Hamlets*, *Hotspurs*, *Macbeths*, and *Brutus's*, you may have seen since his Time, have fallen far short of him,  
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this still would give you no Idea of his particular Excellence. Let us see then what a particular Comparison may do, whether that may yet draw him nearer to you? You have seen a *Hamlet* perhaps, who on the first Appearance of his Father's Spirit has thrown himself into all the straining Vociferations requisite to express Rage and Fury; and the House has thundered with Applause, tho' the misguided Actor was all the while (as *Shakespear* terms it) *tearing a Passion into Rags*. I am the more bold to offer you this particular Instance, because the late Mr. *Addison*, while I sat by him to see this Scene acted, made the same Observation, asking me, with some Surprize, if I thought *Hamlet* should be in so violent a Passion with the Ghost, which, tho' it might have astonished, had not provoked him? For you may observe that, in this beautiful Speech, the Passion never rises beyond an almost breathless Astonishment, or an Impatience limited by filial Reverence to enquire into the suspected Wrongs that may have raised him from his peaceful Tomb! And a Desire to know what a Spirit so seemingly distressed might wish or enjoin a sorrowful Son to execute toward his future Quiet in the Grave? This was the Light into which *Betterton* threw this Scene, which he opened with a Pause of mute Amazement! Then rising slowly to a solemn trembling Voice, he made the Ghost equally terrible to the Spectator as to himself! And in the descriptive Part of the natural Emotions which the ghastly Vision gave him, the Boldness of his Expostulation was still governed by Decency; manly, but not braving; his Voice never rising into that seeming Outrage, or wild Defiance, of what he naturally



naturally revered. But, alas! To preserve this Medium between Mouthing and Meaning too little, to keep the Attention more pleasingly awake by a more tempered Spirit, than by mere Vehemence of Voice, is of all the Master-strokes of an Actor the most difficult to reach. In this none have equalled *Betterton*.—He that feels not himself the Passion he would raise, will talk to a sleeping Audience. But this never was the Fault of *Betterton*; and it has often amazed me to see those who soon came after him throw out in some Parts of a Character a just and graceful Spirit, which *Betterton* himself could not but have applauded; and yet, in the equally shining Passages of the same Character, have heavily dragged the Sentiment along like a dead Weight, with a long toned Voice and absent Eye, as if they had fairly forgot what they were about. If you have never made this Observation, I am contented you should not know where to apply it.

A farther Excellence in *Betterton* was, that he could vary his Spirit to the different Characters he acted. Those wild impatient Starts, that fierce and flashing Fire, which he threw into *Hotspur*, never came from the unruffled Temper of his *Brutus* (for I have more than once seen a *Brutus* as warm as *Hotspur*.) When the *Betterton Brutus* was provok'd in his Dispute with *Cassius*, his Spirits flew out of his Eyes; his steady Looks alone supplied that Terror which he disdain'd an Intemperance in his Voice should rise to. Thus, with a settled Dignity of Contempt, like an unheeding Rock, he repelled upon himself the Foam of *Cassius*. Perhaps the very Words of *Shakespear* will better let you into my Meaning:

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Must I give Way and Room to your rash  
Choler?

Shall I be frighted when a Madman stares?

And a little after,

There is no Terror, *Cassius*, in your Looks, &c.

Not but in some Parts of this Scene, where he reproaches *Cassius*, his Temper is not under this Suppression, but opens into that Warmth which becomes a Man of Virtue; yet this is the hasty Spark of Anger, which *Brutus* himself endeavours to excuse: But with whatever Strength of Nature we see the Poet shew at once the Philosopher and the Hero, yet the Image of the Actor's Excellence will be still imperfect to you, unless Language could put Colours in our Words to paint the Voice with.

For these (and many more) various Excellencies, he had so full a Possession of the Esteem and Regard of his Auditors, that, upon his Entrance into every Scene, he seemed to seize upon the Eyes and Ears of the Giddy and Inadvertent; to have talked or looked another Way would then have been thought Insensibility, or Ignorance. In all his Soliloquies of Moment, the strongest Intelligence of Attitude and Aspect drew you into such an impatient Gaze and eager Expectation, that you almost imbibed the Sentiment with your Eye before the Ear could reach it. I never heard a Line of Tragedy come from *Betterton*, wherein my Judgment, my Ears, and my Imagination, were not fully satisfied, which since his Time, I cannot equally  
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say of any one Actor whatsoever. Not but it is possible to be much his Inferior with greater Excellencies. Had it been practicable to have tied down the clattering Hands of all the ill Judges, who were commonly the Majority of an Audience, to what amazing Perfection might the *English* Theatre have arrived, with so just an Actor as *Betterton* at the Head of it?

*Betterton* had a Voice of that Kind, which gave more Spirits to Terror than to the softer Passions; more Strength than Melody. The Rage and Jealousy of *Othello* became him better than the Sighs and Tenderness of *Castlio*; for, tho' in *Castlio* he only excelled others, in *Othello* he excelled himself; which you will easily believe, when you consider, that in Spite of his Complexion, *Othello* has more natural Beauties than the best Actor can find in all the Magazines of Poetry to animate his Power, and delight his Judgment with.

The Person of this excellent Actor was suitable to his Voice, more manly than sweet, not exceeding the middle Stature, inclining to the corpulent; of a serious and penetrating Aspect, his Limbs nearer the athletic than the delicate Proportion; yet, however formed, there arose from the Harmony of the Whole a commanding Mein of Majesty, which the fairer-faced, or (as *Shakespeare* calls them) the curled Darlings of his Time, ever wanted something to be equal Masters of. There was some Years ago to be had, almost in every Printshop, a Metzotinto from *Kneller*, extremely like him.

In all I have said of *Betterton*, I confine myself to the Time of his Strength and highest Power in Action, that you may make Allow-

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of Mr. Thomas Betterton. 33

ances, from what he was able to execute at fifty, to what you might have seen of him at past seventy. For, tho', to the last, he was without his Equal, he might not then be equal to his former Self; yet, so far was he from being ever overtaken, that for many Years after his Decease, I seldom saw any of his Parts in *Shakespeare* supplied by others, but it drew from me the Lamentation of *Opbelia* upon *Hamlet's* being unlike what she had seen him:

Ah! Woe is me!

T' have seen what I have seen, see what I see!

Thus far we have quoted Mr. *Cibber*, for the Character of Mr. *Betterton* as an Actor; but some other Particulars there are relating chiefly to his private Life, of which I think it becomes me to take Notice. He was a Man of great Study and Application, and in Regard to the Subject which employed his Attention, as knowing, and as much a Master, as any Man could be. He was an excellent Critic, but more especially on *Shakespeare* and *Fletcher*, not in remarking their Defects, but in searching out, and producing to Light, all their minute and hidden Beauties; in this he was so accurate and so successful, that Mr. *Rowe*, who was himself an excellent Judge, and had also studied the same Authors with deep Attention, says the strongest Things that Man can say of *Betterton's* Skill in this Respect. Yet extensive as his Knowledge

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ledge was, and high as he stood in Reputation and Esteem, he was the modestest Man living. The young Actors revered him as a Parent, but they loved him as a Parent at the same Time. He was gentle in his Language, mild in his Behaviour, ready in Commendation, sincere in Advice, and so indirect in his Reproofs, that he had an Art in shewing Men their Foibles without their seeing that this was what he intended, and the Secret was the better kept, because he never mentioned such Failings to another Man. Mr. Booth, who knew him only in his Decline, said, he never saw him, either on or off the Stage, without learning from him; and frequently observed, that Mr. Betterton was no Actor, that he put on his Part with his Clothes, and was the very Man he undertook to be, till the Play was over, and Nothing more. So exact in following Nature, that the Look of Surprise he put on in the Character of *Hamlet*, struck him so in that of the Ghost (when he first played it) as to disable him for some Moments, from going on. Yet he was so communicative, that in those Parts he played highest, he would enter into the Grounds of his Action, and explain, as far as it was possible to explain the Principles of his Art. He was admirably versed in the Action of the Stage, considered as independent of Sentiment; and knew perfectly the Dependance, Connection, and Business of the

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the Scenes, so as to attract, pursue, and satisfy, the Attention of an Audience; an Art extremely necessary to be known to an Author; and yet the hardest to be acquired of any. But what shewed his accurate and thorough Skill in Dramatic Entertainments, was his own Performances as an Author, which, to those who read them, may possibly seem too high a Complement; because it will be thought, and indeed justly, that we have many better Writers of Comedies than he; but yet, as to the single Point I commend him for, he has been excelled by none. This is in the exact Disposition of the Scenes, their just Length, great Propriety, and natural Connection; to all which was owing their being esteemed the best acting Plays that had been brought upon the Stage; and of how great Consequence this is to the fate of Tragedy and Comedy may be learned from all *Bank's* Pieces, which, though they have nothing else to recommend them, seldom fail to affect an Audience as much, or more, than some that are deservedly in better Reputation. The Works of Mr. Betterton are, 1. *The Woman made a Justice.* 2. *The unjust Judge; or, Appius and Virginia.* This was only altered by Mr. Betterton, being written by *Webster*, an old Poet, who flourished in the Reign of King James I. 3. *The Amorous Widow, or the Wanton Wife;* a Play written on the Plan of *Moliere's George Dandin.* But,



But, to return to Mr. *Betterton*, he was so far from putting on assuming Looks, and a supercilious Air to young Authors, that he always insisted on their reading his Parts to him, and took their Instructions in the acting them, with the utmost Deference and Respect. As he had the rare Felicity of passing thro' Life without Envy or Reproach, tho' not without Misfortunes; so this Felicity was also heightened by his fortunate Choice of a Wife, with whom he passed his Days in great Quiet and Happiness. She was so strongly affected with his Death, which, as we have shewn, was somewhat sudden, that she ran distracted, tho' she always appeared rather a prudent and constant, than a fond and passionate Wife. She did not long survive Mr. *Betterton*, according to our best Informations, about six Months; but this was long enough for Queen *Anne* to express her Compassion, by giving her a Pension, which was hardly settled upon her before it ceased. She is said to have recovered her Senses a little before she expired. Thus we may see, that all Professions honestly and ably discharged are honourable, and that it is not at all impossible for Persons of real Worth to transfer the Reputation they acquire on the Stage to the Characters they sustain in Life.

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